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ABSTRACT

In his book, "Writing with Power" (1981), Peter Elbow spends several chapters circling around the phenomenon of "voice." This paper argues that Peter Elbow's examinations of contraries and paradoxes--particularly those that concern writing voice and teaching--contain elements of "koan" practice. The paper suggests that to compare Elbow's approach with these Zen exercises may shed more than rational light on the business of teaching writing. It states that a "koan" is a "public case," i.e., the record of an ancient event and often involves the sayings of famous Zen masters and their dialogues with students, and that to the beginning Zen student, koans seem quirky and paradoxical. According to the paper, another aspect of consciousness needs to be engaged to reach any depth of insight into a koan--koans open up the intuitive, "direct knowing" aspect of consciousness. The paper considers that among the many contraries and paradoxes that Elbow explores in his book, the two that are most crucial are voice and teaching. It finds that just as a Zen teacher guides his students through koan exercises, Elbow steers writers along the path to "real voice," and if "real voice" is the koan at the center of writing, then "good teaching" is the koan at the center of the writing teacher's profession. The paper concludes that a Zen student lives by his or her koan, a writer writes, and a teacher teaches. (NKA)

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Paradoxes and Contraries: Teaching and Writing as Life, Life as Teaching and Writing

Scenarios at Four C's, Atlanta, Georgia

My Zen sitting practice has introduced me to koan study. Koans, my fellow sitters explain, are paradoxes that rupture our conventional perceptions of reality. But how do they relate to me as a writer and teacher of writing? I get an answer to this question when I attend 4Cs in Atlanta. By chance—surely not!—I attend a presentation where the speaker looks more like a Buddhist nun and lights a candle before she reads her paper. Zen and writing? I enter a space, its door cracked open through the Buddhist writing teacher, that exhilarates me with its previously unrealized possibilities for my daily work as a teacher.

"I have been wondering," I tell Peter Elbow after a talk on evaluation of student writing—I am still at the same conference—"you are fond of paradoxes and contraries; they are important to you. They remind me of koans. Are you, perhaps, into Zen"?

I have phrased this awkwardly, but he looks at me kindly. "No," he answers after a pause, considering perhaps," but there was someone else who thought so. In one of my early books." Another pause. Then, "Why don't you check it out?"

Someone Else Who Thought So

In his book, *Writing with Power (WWP)*, Peter Elbow spends several chapters circling around the phenomenon of "voice." At one point, he exclaims in frustration, "I fear I will never be clear about what I mean by voice" (286). What better moment than to introduce the devil's advocate in form of a letter from a colleague he admires:

The voice phenomenon cannot well be discussed in rationalistic terms; every time you tried to define the conditions of it arising, you failed hopelessly. Why not just give it up? Why not confront Voice for what it is? What is It? That's the question Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism are built around. The very question is a Zen koan.... When I speak with Voice, It's loud because It speaks directly to your Ear, not just to your ear, which is constantly distracted by other voices....You teach writing by pointing out to students when your Ear hears and asking them to do more of That. The rationalists tear their hair out. Can that be teaching?...

*Don't try to explain it to rationalistic people in rationalistic terms! It is something that ultimately cannot be explained to anyone who hasn't heard. And those who have heard will forgive you for the inadequacy of your words. (*Nold qtd. in Elbow, *WWP* 287*)*

A clever move, for this letter allows Elbow to insist on teasing out contraries. Not only is he not content with Ellen Nold's exclusionary explanation of voice; it actually spurs him on to forge ahead and "to work this thing out more fully and rationally" (*WWP* 287). He is the democrat who wants to include all.

Like Elbow, I am intrigued by the mystery of voice, but rather than putting faith into the rational approach, it seems more promising for my practice as a sitter and teacher to follow Nold's lead. A particular sentence in her letter shall make the starting point of my "checking this out," shall form the beginning of my inquiry: "What is Voice," she asks, then answers her own question elliptically, "The very question is a Zen koan." I want to argue in this essay that Elbow's examinations of contraries and paradoxes—

particularly those that concern writing voice and teaching--contain elements of koan practice. To compare Elbow's approach with these Zen exercises may shed more than rational light on our business of teaching writing.

Koan Practice

Definition and History

In some Zen schools, the study of koans as a way to enlightenment is part of daily practice. A "koan" is a "public case," i.e., the record of an ancient event (*Blue Cliff Record* xvii), and often involves the sayings of famous Zen masters and their dialogues with students (Suzuki 80). Of course, probing questions and answer sessions existed in Zen from the beginning. But until their collection, they were not formally thought of as koans or tools for teaching. Other koans derive from the life of Buddha, Buddhist scriptures, and the lives of the old masters (Loori xxxvi-vii). One of the most complete and revered collections of such sayings, *The Blue Cliff Record,* calls koans the "living record of generations of enlightened practice" (xiii).

To the beginning Zen student, koans seem quirky and paradoxical. The mind encounters them as a wall against which it pounds in utter frustration (Loori xxvii). Here are a few examples of koans gleaned from Suzuki (80-81) and Loori (xxv); both questions and answers—if answers are provided—comprise the koan, the "gateless gate" to true reality:

- Question: Who is the Buddha? Answer: Three pounds of flax.
- Question: What is the meaning of the First Patriarch's visit to China? Answer: The cypress tree in the front courtyard.

- Question: What is the Way? Answer: Your everyday mind, that is the Way.
- Question: You know the sound of two hands clapping. What's the sound of one hand clapping?
- Question: What is your original face, the face you had before your parents were born?

These last two koans are actually elaborations of earlier, more cryptic questions: What is the sound of one hand? and, What is your original face?

John Daido Loori, Abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery in Mt. Tremper, NY, argues that these questions are not riddles or paradoxes but tools that will open us to essential truths. These puzzling and playful scenarios are really asking, "What is reality? What is life? What is death? What is God? Who am I?" (xxv). Similarly, Sandy Stewart, a Zen teacher from North Carolina advises, "Think of a koan as a tool to solve the problem of self" (Personal email).

Mental Impasse and Enlightenment

Confronted with a koan, the mind of a serious Zen student comes to an impasse, a "mental crisis" (Suzuki 81), that eventually explodes, preferably under the guidance of a skilled master. Loori says, "A koan is specifically designed to short-circuit the intellectual process. Another aspect of consciousness needs to be engaged in order to reach any depth of insight into a koan. Koans open up the intuitive, 'direct knowing' aspect or our consciousness" (xxv). Once a koan is solved, once the door has been opened, the tool, the koan, can be dispensed with and questioners see that the truth has always belonged to them, from the very beginning of their existence (Suzuki 85-87). This

momentary insight is, of course, not the end of the road because then it is on to the next koan.

Misuse/Decline

The use of koans as teaching tools has not been without its controversies. On one hand, the koan exercise systematized the Zen tradition and spelled out the goal of the enlightenment experience. In a manner of speaking, it became democratized and thus more followers were able to share it. Additionally, this structured practice assured the survival of Zen Buddhism (Suzuki 77-78). On the other hand, some masters "wasted" the collections of "public cases" by treating them as aesthetic or conceptual riddles (*Blue Cliff Record* xxv). Additionally, by channeling the raw and irreverent energy of the early Zen masters into a somewhat mechanical exercise, koan study led to the decline of spontaneous awakening (Suzuki 77). As a system, koans "were strangled with analysis," says Loori. "It was as if people had tried to bottle the spring breeze. The koan lost all of its freshness and vitality" (xxxvii).

Back to Elbow's Paradoxes and Contraries

In reading Elbow, I am struck with his insistence on recapturing the freshness and vitality of our writing voices and teaching natures. Among the many contraries and paradoxes he explores, I consider those two, voice and teaching, most crucial. They are "pivotal" in the way Zen Master Loori considers koans to be "pivotal" (xxv) for they explore the basic truth of our profession as writing teachers.

A recent controversy in our local paper exemplifies this insight beautifully. In a letter to the editor, the judge of a writing contest bemoaned the lack of voice in the submissions from area high school students. Lifeless prose, punctuated with clichés and generalities, dominated their essays, he wrote. As the angry and passionate retorts from teachers made clear, both voice and teaching writing were on the line. How could they teach a lively style when the State asked for impromptu essays that followed the five-paragraph format? Elbow might like the judges response: "So … teach your students (in maybe two days) how to write like robots for the state, and teach them the much more important lesson of how to write like thinking, feeling human beings—as you did" (O'Rourke).

To fulfill state requirements, to pass writing tests in 8th and 11th grade, these students had been taught to write without passion; these teachers, their jobs on the line, had struggled with the tension between what they knew as good writing and what they knew students must produce in 20-minute timed tests. All were angry; all saw no way out of the dilemma.

Voice

Voice is the koan at the center of writing. Elbow calls it the "juice" that "combines the qualities of *magic potion, mother's milk,* and *electricity*" (WWP 286). Unlike his letter-writing colleague who guards voice against rationalistic peons, Elbow decides to offer the intricacies of no-voice, voice, and real voice to the masses. "Real voice," Elbow writes, is "deeply authentic or resonant." It often arises in a "crisis

situation" when "'normal reality'" is suspended to allow "words from the center" (Elbow, *WWP* 294-295).

These phrases, "crisis situation," suspension of "normal reality," and "words from the center" echo the mental impasse experienced during koan study as well as the "initiation into a new way of being" Zen Master Loori speaks of in his book, *Two Arrows Meeting in Mid Air*. "The bottom line of koan study is self-realization," he states. "Koans continually cut away all of the extras, stripping away layers of conditioning, getting us to the ground of being.... Each koan presents us with a possibility of experiencing true freedom, the freedom which is our inherent birth right" (xliii).

Just as a Zen teacher guides his students through koan exercises, Elbow steers writers along the path to "real voice." In working with a koan, Zen students initially experience the ceaseless chatter of their minds and the seemingly impenetrable wall of contradictions (Loori xxviii-xxix). Similarly, writers moving toward "real voice" must accept "feelings, experiences, and tones of voice that felt unacceptable" because these negative aspects hide "energy and power" that need to be tapped (Elbow, *WWP* 301). They must wade through false starts, clumsy phrasing, and messy drafts to reach a voice that convinces its readers. The exhilarating certainty of "real voice" is born out of risk taking, a terrible vulnerability not often encouraged in writing classes. "If," Elbow says, "you really seek excellence ... you need to stop playing it safe: ... jump over the edge.... You will write much that is terrible.... But you will get rewards" and create "writing that someone would actually want to read by choice, not just for pay or for a favor" (*WWP* 301-303).

Thus the solution to a koan—be it during Zen practice or in the writing classroom—lies in the patient doing of what needs to be done, here and now—despite the uncertainty of its results. Koan practice—both kinds--must involve more than the study of dusty "public cases" or the predictability of formalized writing instruction—thesis, outline, draft, proofreading. Instead, lived with one's "whole body and mind" (Loori xliii), a koan must become a way of being (Loori xviii) and a way of writing.

Teaching

Just as the koan exercise sheds light on the centrality of voice in writing, it helps to illuminate yet another of Elbow's crucial paradoxes. I am speaking here of the central issue in his essay, "Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process."

"My argument is," Elbow begins with welcome directness, "that good teaching seems a struggle because it calls on skills or mentalities that are actually contrary to each other and thus tend to interfere with each other." He argues that the "two conflicting mentalities needed for good teaching stem from the two conflicting obligations inherent in the job." Obligated to our students, we assume the role of nurturer or coach; yet, responsible to our institutions and society at large, we take on the persona of judge ("Embracing" 54).

If "real voice" is the koan at the center of writing, then "good teaching" is the koan at the center of our profession. The paradox lies in the seemingly irreconcilable stances we are asked to assume. It cannot be solved, Elbow warns us, when we prefer one role to the other or affect neutrality toward both ("Embracing" 54). Just as a koan exercise, the paradox of good teaching causes us consternation and "perplexity"

("Embracing" 54). This puzzlement forms the impasse we have come to recognize as an important state of koan study. Moreover, Elbow calls the "conflicting loyalties … paradigmatic" even though such conflict seems to contradict the more commonly accepted model of teaching as harmonious ("Embracing" 55). Examining Piaget's claim that education "involves both assimilation and accommodation," Elbow writes: "Good learning is not a matter of finding a happy medium where both parties are transformed as little as possible. Rather both parties must be maximally transformed—in a sense deformed" ("Embracing" 58).

Such radical shifts are also crucial to koan practice, but Zen tradition might describe the moment of transformation, of awakening, not so much as "deforming" than as "un-deforming." Certainly, by accepting a koan as their own, Zen students shape the question to fit their lives at a particular point in time. In the moment of enlightenment, however, they awaken to their true Self. In Zen terminology, they return to their origins, an act of taking back what has been "deformed" through the conditions of everyday life. In short, they see their original face.

To probe more deeply the paradox at the heart of good teaching, Elbow calls on Christ and Socrates as "archetypal good teachers." Both were extreme in both giving support and exacting judgment. He writes: "I am struck … with how much they both relied on irony, parable, myth, and other utterances that hide while they communicate." In a sense, Elbow says, they "were willing … to bend and disfigure and in the eyes of many to profane what they taught, yet on the other hand they were equally extreme in their insistence that learners bend or transform themselves in order to become fit receptacles" ("Embracing" 58).

Teachers, who willingly bend, disfigure, and even profane in order to reach their students are plentiful in the Zen tradition. Sandy Stewart, the Zen teacher from North Carolina, gives these two examples of teachers unafraid of appearing illogical and irreverent:

> When the monk asks Joshu, 'Does this dog manifest Buddha Nature?' and Joshu answers, 'No!' apparently contradicting the Buddhist tenet that all beings are Buddha, Joshu's answer is a paradox.
>
> When a monk asks Tozan, 'What is Buddha?' and Tozan answers, 'Three pounds of flax,' Tozan's reply is a paradox since most of us think that Buddha is a man who lived 2500 years ago. (Personal email)

But just as the transformation of students can be understood more truly as "un-deforming," so a teacher's use of puzzling statements and actions may hide the truth from those still blind. Zen Master Loori, whom I quoted earlier, argues that the paradox "exists [only] in language … in the words and ideas that *describe* reality. In reality itself there are no paradoxes. The use of the koan is an attempt to go beyond the words and ideas that describe reality, and to directly and intimately experience that reality in itself" (xxv). In other words, the paradox is verbal, not existential. As long as we stay in the realm of words and concepts, we cannot see these teachers for what they truly are. Our distorted vision of reality views them and their teachings as distorted as well.

Very few teachers, Elbow assures us, can follow Christ or Socrates and fuse fierceness and support. Most need to "make peace between contraries" and realize "that opposite mentalities or processes can enhance each other" ("Embracing" 60). "To teach well," Elbow writes, "we must find *some* way to be loyal both to students and to

knowledge and society" ("Embracing" 64). That "way" translates into doing. In other words, just as writers find "real voice" only through writing and re-writing, teachers work out those seemingly conflicting loyalties through teaching. There are just as many false starts, just as many occasions of despair, and just as many moments of grace as there are in writing.

Elbow's way involves alternating between the two poles of "giving away and guarding" ("Embracing" 56). He invokes the "spirit or principle of serving contraries" ("Embracing" 63) rather than a particular solution because individual teachers will choose—his words—"widely different ways of putting [the alternating approach] into practice" ("Embracing" 61). It is an approach, so Elbow affirms, "that naturally leads a teacher to higher standards yet greater supportiveness" ("Embracing" 62). What he recommends in his book, *Writing with Power*, when talking to writers, is also appropriate for teachers: "My theme in the end is that you should take charge of your self by practicing the different recipes till you have them at your disposal." (8). Or, as Loori says, "It's very difficult to work with students for years, to give them nothing and have them realize their own inherent power....The fact is you can't do anything for anybody. Each person must do it alone" (13-14).

The Magic and Mystery Return

So far I have not mentioned yet the magic of voice and the mystery of good teaching. Let me restate the existential question, the koan: What is "real voice"? What is good teaching? These questions must first arise in our consciousness before we can even embark on their answers. Structuring our quest will be helpful. Thus Elbow defends his

"solution" for embracing contraries: "The approach does not take away any of the conflict between trying to fulfill two conflicting functions. It merely gives a context and suggests a structure for doing so" ("Embracing" 65). Elbow is careful to emphasize "the underlying structure of contrasting mentalities," which he calls "central," rather than advocating "merely a mechanical sequence of external stages, which is not necessary at all" ("Embracing" 65).

To balance the danger of systems and structures we must acknowledge the mystery in our lives as students and teachers. In his discussion of voice and teaching, Elbow re-directs us toward the magic of writing and the mystery of the good teacher just as present-day Zen masters stress the immediacy and individual relevance of the koan. Perhaps, Elbow says, "Magic can be returned to words" (*WWP* 361). Do I say, he asks, that you "must enter into the thing or merge your soul with the thing" (*WWP* 357)? Perhaps, he answers again.

Magically, "real voice" appears. Mysteriously, some teachers fuse nurture and judgment as they personify "the highest standards of excellence and manage to make students exert and stretch themselves as never before" ("Embracing" 64). And Loori has this to say about the mysterious power of koans:

> In frustrating the intellect, koans dismantle the customary way of solving problems and open up new dimensions of human consciousness. Our usual means of answering a question depends on what has been successful in the past. All through our lives and educations, we've been taught to use our minds in a particular linear and sequential way.... When it comes to the creative process and spiritual questions, a whole different kind of consciousness is involved. All of us

possess it, [but] somehow our education has minimized or completely excluded it. (xxvii-viii)

We solve the questions by living them. A Zen student lives his or her koan, a writer writes, and a teacher teaches. Elbow says, "You must learn… how to churn out words whether or not you feel in tune with what you are writing…. Sometimes you cannot get to magic except through a long valley of fake, dead writing. Though you must believe in magic, then, often you must be willing to do without it" (*WWP* 373).

Conclusion

Let me end this comparison of koan study and Elbow's paradoxes with a few words by Abbot Loori, which—although meant to describe koans—equally apply to writing and teaching. All the questions," Loori says, "are constantly pointing to the same place, to the life of each of us. And all the questions have to be resolved in the very same place—in the life of [every]one of us. But unless it's *your* question, it can never be *your* answer…. Otherwise practice is imitation, or just another way of staying busy" (xlii).

And now to be practical—for the business of koans as well as the business of writing and teaching is practical: What do we do when Monday morning comes around? Well, we open the doors to our classrooms, say cheerfully "Good morning!" and transform the "either/or" into a "both/and." We teach and we write.

"To live *with paradoxes* is just common wisdom," Elbow once said in a conversation. Better yet, to live *the paradox* is just common wisdom.

Leonard Jacobson, in his book *Embracing the Present*, says it more magically:

There is no journey.

There is no destination.

You are already there. (50)

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